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RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 1489
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 4190
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 3429
RUEHNEH/AMCONSUL HYDERABAD 0162
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 1880
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 5725
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 2330
RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI 9268
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 3252
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 5853
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SUBJECT: SPECIAL REPORT: INDIAN MEDIA COVERAGE OF
PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA'S INAUGURATION ON JANUARY 20

11. SUMMARY: On Tuesday night (22:30 India time) urban India was glued to their TV sets as "history was being made, and hope and change being ushered in" for the United States. Live telecasts, with Indian language commentary and voice-overs, ran on all mainstream news channels. Leading broadcasters roped in politicians, diplomats, academics, think-tankers, and US-based media persons and experts for special reactions and analyses that ran until the wee hours of the morning; non-stop coverage of the new Administration continues on TV a day later.

The morning newspapers January 21 were no less jubilant, splashing the event across front pages below euphoric headlines. All newspapers published the President's speech, complete or in part. Although the breadth of comment included some skepticism, Indians were deeply impressed by the American transition and Inaugural ceremonies for our emphasis on change, youth, racial equality and multiculturalism. END SUMMARY.

'WE ARE A NATION OF CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS, JEWS AND HINDUS - AND NON-BELIEVERS'

12. India's newspaper of record THE TIMES OF INDIA - one of the largest circulating newspapers in the English language - highlighted India's pride at the President's acknowledgement of Muslim- and Hindu-Americans in his Address. The paper reported that Indians watching the event on TV and internet were transfixed by Obamania. Executives finished work early, students rescheduled

their tutorials, and housewives finished with their dinner chores early to watch the event, the paper reported.

-- SUFI BLESSINGS, ROCK VIDEO FOR NEW PREZ

¶3. The TIMES OF INDIA reported that, in an unprecedented act, a special sufi 'gawwali' [group musical performance] was organized in Delhi in one of India's most important Muslim shrines to honor the new President. Similarly, a television channel aired a special video tribute by an Indian rock band, called "Obama, Tu Nay Macha Diya Hangama" [Obama, you shook up the world]!

-- "MORNING, MR. PRESIDENT"

¶4. Welcoming the new President in the above headlined editorial, THE TIMES OF INDIA set an Indian agenda for him. "For the sake of the world's security, Obama must press Islamabad to clamp down on these [terror] groups and close down their bases, something that the Bush administration failed to do for most of its run. And then there is the Middle East mess..."

'ARE YOU LISTENING MR. PRESIDENT?"

¶5. A leading English daily, the HINDUSTAN TIMES, published a four-page special on President Obama. The paper reported that a new 17-nation BBC World Service poll has revealed that as many as 63 per cent of Indians

NEW DELHI 00000126 002 OF 003

anticipate America's relationship with the rest of the world improving under his presidency.

¶6. According to the poll, Indians believe the U.S. should emphasize dealing with the global financial crisis (47 per cent top priority, 21 per cent important) and improving America's relationships.

-- 'YES IT'S CHANGE, BUT NO SURPRISES'

¶7. Editorially, THE HINDUSTAN TIMES predicted change would be most evident in the new Administration's economic policy. "There is no reason to detract from the hope and excitement Obama has been able to bring to the global stage. But no one should have any illusions. Obama will be a hard-nosed advocate of U.S. interests in a time of scarcity," the paper said.

-- 'OBAMA TO BAT FOR STRONG INDO-US TIES'

¶8. THE INDIAN EXPRESS reported that, while there may be some anxiety in India about how the Obama administration might deal with the sub-continent, Obama has personally voiced his commitment to further build a close strategic partnership between the two countries.

'OBAMA PROMISES BREAK WITH BUSH'

¶9. Analyzing President Obama's inaugural speech, influential South Asia strategic expert C. Raja Mohan wrote in the INDIAN EXPRESS "Obama also left no one in doubt about his commitment to pursue the war on Terror that Bush had launched after 9/11. At the same time, Obama signaled that his way of fighting terror might be fundamentally different from that of his predecessor. In a bow to the near universal criticism of the Bush foreign policies, Obama promised both restraint and resolve in the conduct of American policy in the coming years."

-- "PRESIDENT OBAMA: LESSONS IN GRACE"

¶10. "One has to hand it to the Americans. They know how to celebrate," exclaimed THE ASIAN AGE, a paper often critical of U.S. policy, commenting on the inauguration

event. In a glowing tribute to America, the paper said, "The American spirit is too bright and too hopeful to make such a historic journey somber or operatic. It looks forward rather than behind."

¶11. In admiration, the paper further said, "The world may not agree with America and Americans at all times and on all issues, but in almost no other major country does one see the victor accept his laurels with such magnanimity and the vanquished the lesson of defeat with such grace."

¶12. Drawing comparisons with situations in India, the paper said: "We in India pride ourselves on being the biggest democracy in the world: but here the victor revels and the vanquished sulks; and the celebrations often degenerate into taunts, muscle-flexing and bitterness. Why can't we ever see such grace in this

NEW DELHI 00000126 003 OF 003

country?"

-- URDU PRESS RELIEVED AT "PROSPECT OF PEACE"

¶13. The common refrain in the Urdu press, mirroring India's Muslim public opinion, was that the prospects of international peace have brightened with President Obama's arrival, and more importantly President Bush's departure. The normally antagonistic Urdu daily RASHTRIYA SAHARA, also India's number one, showed signs of mellowing, with a special page of Obama photos from his childhood to the present. The banner headline: "New Hope for the Peace-loving People of the World."

¶14. The paper said Muslims all over the world are glad the "Bush era of aggression" has come to an end. Editorially, the paper said: "Obama has several challenges, the most important one being the Middle East. Israel has to be stopped."

¶15. India's number two Urdu daily SIASAT said: "Obama should see that Bush is penalized under American law for his grave mistakes." In a similar diatribe, the HAMARA SAMAJ Urdu daily said: "By the grace of the Almighty, humanity has got rid of the ugliest and most hot-headed American ruler, George Bush." Leading Urdu daily INQUILAB said, "Obama will have to remove the anti-human elements from US policies, so that hatred against America may deescalate. George Bush has left a lot of work for him to do."

¶16. COMMENT: The reporting and commentary on President Obama's inauguration was highly positive. The euphoria is such that a TV commentator was forced to remind excited panelists and Indian viewers -- "Wait a minute, he's the President of another country!" Reports also highlighted Vice President Joe Biden's credentials as a close friend of India. Biden, the former chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, was a strong backer of the Indo-U.S. nuclear deal, and played an important role in securing Congressional approval for it, stories noted. As reported by THE TIMES OF INDIA, the only "sore note" is the new Administration's inclination to draw a link between the situation on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border and the India - Pakistan Kashmir dispute. The Democrats' focus on CTBT and NPT are also reportedly seen as likely bones of contention. Media coverage of President Obama's inauguration, however, suggests that while official India has its apprehensions and anxieties, the Indian public is reveling in the "new friendly face of America." For block quotes and editorial excerpts from India's English and language dailies, please see the separate Media Reaction Report.

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